A HISTORY
OF THE
ENGLISH PARISH

THE CULTURE OF RELIGION FROM AUGUSTINE TO VICTORIA

N. J. G. POUNDS

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK http: //www.cup.cam.ac.uk
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011–4211, USA http://www.cup.org
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© N. J. G. Pounds 2000

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2000

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in Fournier MT 12/13.5pt in QuarkXPress™ [SE]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Pounds, Norman John Greville.
A history of the English parish: the culture of religion from
Augustine to Victoria / N. J. G. Pounds.
p. cm.
Includes index.
ISBN 0 521 63348 6
1. Parishes – England – History. 2. Christianity and culture –
England – History. 3. England – Church history. I. Title.
BR744.P58 2000
262′.22′0942 – dc21 98–53584 CIP

ISBN 0 521 63348 6 hardback

CONTENTS

List of illustrations *page* viii
Preface xiii
List of abbreviations xv

PART I THE ORIGINS OF THE PAROCHIAL SYSTEM

1 Church and parish 3
2 Rectors and vicars: from Gratian to the Reformation 41
3 The parish, its bounds and its division 67
4 The urban parish 113

PART II THE FUNCTIONS OF THE PARISH

5 The parish and its servants 155
6 The economics of the parish 200
7 The parish and the community 250
8 The parish and the church courts: a mirror of society 291
9 The parish church, popular culture and the Reformation 325

PART III THE PARISH AND ITS CHURCH

10 The parish: its church and churchyard 371
11 The fabric of the church: the priest's church 430
12 The people's church: the nave and the laity 464

Notes 511
Index 579

ILLUSTRATIONS

The traditional English counties xxvi
1.1 Silchester: a probable Christian church of the later Roman Empire 8
1.2 Christ with the *labarum* and two pomegranates 9
1.3 The archaeological evidence for Christianity in Roman Britain 11
1.4 Anglo-Saxon place-names incorporating the Latin element *eccles*, a church 14
1.5 The episcopal organisation of early Anglo-Saxon England 16
1.6 A tentative map of minsters in Anglo-Saxon England 19
1.7 Mother-churches and dependent churches 20
1.8 The parish of Andover 23
1.9 Minsters and their *parochiae* in southern Hampshire 24
1.10 Dedicatory slab and sundial, Kirkdale 33
1.11 A tombstone built into the church of St Mary-le-Wigford, Lincoln 34
1.12 The superior church of Mottisfont and its daughter-churches 35
1.13 The seven South Elmham parishes 36
2.1 The ecclesiastical hierarchy of England 43
2.2 The episcopal geography of England in the later Middle Ages 44
2.3 The five dioceses created in 1542 45
2.4 Rectories and vicarages in late medieval Nottinghamshire 51
2.5 The hierarchy of ecclesiastical units 52
3.1 Parish boundaries in south-eastern Cambridgeshire 68
3.2 The convergence of boundaries on the site of *arbor sicca*, the Lizard Peninsula 69
3.3 The convergence of boundaries at Rymer's Point, the Suffolk Breckland 70
3.4 The convergence of parish boundaries at Reepham 71

3.5 The 'aratral' boundary of Landbeach parish 76
3.6 The course taken in the perambulation of the parish of Purton 81
3.7 Probably the oldest parish boundary map, Minster-in-Thanet 81
3.8 The private chapel in the outer bailey of Skipton Castle 82
3.9 Chantry chapel of the Tyrell family, Gipping 83
3.10 The area of individual parishes in Lancashire 85
3.11 The areas of Suffolk parishes 86
3.12 The size distribution of parishes in England 87
3.13 The growth of population in medieval England 88
3.14 The growth of population in modern England 90
3.15 The parish of Lelant 93
3.16 The private chapel in Beverston Castle 104–5
3.17 Bridge chapels 107
3.18 The bridge chapel of St Thomas à Becket on London Bridge 108
3.19 Parishes in Lancashire in the mid-seventeenth century 110
4.1 St Mary's, Tanner Street, Winchester 115
4.2 Winchester: location of city churches 116
4.3 The churches of medieval Huntingdon 118
4.4 The parishes of medieval Southampton 120
4.5 The parish of St Peter Hungate, Norwich 121
4.6 The parishes of medieval Norwich 122
4.7 The parishes of medieval London 124–5
4.8 The union of parishes at York 131
4.9 Chronology of town foundation 136
4.10 The parishes and churches of Salisbury 139
4.11 Medieval King's Lynn 140
4.12 The borough of Lostwithiel 142
4.13 Houses of the four most important mendicant orders 150
5.1 The movement of priests with locative names 165
5.2 Exchanges of benefices of incumbents in the deanery of the East Riding of Yorkshire 167
5.3 The priest's house at Kentisbeare 178
5.4 The priest's house, West Dean 179
5.5 The Vicar's Peel, Corbridge 180
5.6 The opening page of the wardens' accounts, St Martin-in-the-Fields, 1575 184
5.7 The parish chest, Conistone 185
5.8 A poor men's box, Conistone 197
6.1 Clerical incomes in the diocese of Carlisle 203
6.2 Valuations of benefices in the diocese of Ely 204

6.3 Valuation of livings in England 206
6.4 (a) The extent of glebe belonging to each parish; (b) the rental value of the parochial glebe 217
6.5 (a) The extent of the parochial glebe in the diocese of Ely and (b) its rental value 218–19
6.6 (a) A late medieval chalice; (b) a late sixteenth-century communion cup 227
6.7 Income and expenditure for Tewkesbury parish 233
6.8 Income and expenditure of the wardens of St Mary's, Reading 234
7.1 The correspondence between petty crime and the price of wheat 254
7.2 Wall-painting at Peakirk, showing women gossiping 256
7.3 The memorial brass of Thomas Awmarle, Cardinham 257
7.4 The movement of the patronal festival to less crowded times of year 260
7.5 The beneficiaries of briefs read out in the parish church of Abbot's Ripton 271
7.6 Bequests for (a) the poor and (b) masses 272
7.7 The geographical spread of membership of the combined gilds of Stratford-upon-Avon 275
7.8 Differing relations between vill, manor and parish 278
7.9 The manor of Winnianton 279
7.10 The distribution of types of settlement 281
7.11 A draw-bar built into the doorway of Conistone church 284
8.1 The archdeacon's court, St Nicholas' church, King's Lynn 300
8.2 Consistory court, Chester Cathedral 301
8.3 The case load of the court of the archdeacon of Chester 303
9.1 Ickleton parish church, wall-painting 329
9.2 St Christopher carrying the Christ-child across a ford 340
9.3 St Michael killing the dragon 341
9.4 Samson carrying away the gates of Gaza 342
9.5 Window at Dewsbury parish church 345
9.6 'Christ of the Trades', Breage parish church 346
9.7 The 'three living and the three dead' 347
9.8 Bench-end: sheep grazing, Altarnon, Bodmin Moor 348
9.9 A roundel depicting February 349
9.10 Bench-end: cloth-finisher 350
9.11 Bench-end: ship 351
9.12 Role reversal 352
9.13 Graffito of hobby-horse 353
9.14 Graffiti of the Great Plague and two churches with spires 354
9.15 The 'blemya', Ripon Cathedral 355
9.16 The elephant and castle 356

9.17 A ceiling boss, Southwark Cathedral 357
9.18 Foliate heads 358
9.19 The tree of life 359
9.20 The twelfth-century font at Bodmin 360
9.21 The south door, Kilpeck parish church 361
9.22 Baptismal fonts at (a) Altarnon, (b) Tintagel 368
10.1 The parish church of Brentor 374
10.2 The basilican church of St Peter's, Rome 377
10.3 Kilpeck church: two-cell plan 378
10.4 The evolution of a church plan, Elham 379
10.5 A small, late medieval church, Little Shelford 382
10.6 Part of the chancel arch of the church of St Peter, Guestwick 384
10.7 Cross-sections through naves of late medieval parish churches 386
10.8 A typical 'Somerset' tower: Leigh-on-Mendip 389
10.9 Probus church tower 390
10.10 The English Midlands, showing areas where towers with spires predominated 391
10.11 The 'Stone Belt' 392
10.12 The chancel of Adderbury parish church 398
10.13 Bodmin parish church 399
10.14 The transport of materials for the construction of Bodmin parish church 401
10.15 The spire of Louth parish church 403
10.16 Lavenham parish church 409
10.17 Long Melford parish church 410
10.18 A corbel in the Lane chapel, Cullompton parish church 411
10.19 A brass recording the fact that Sir Albinus de Enderby built Bag Enderby church 412
10.20 A brass of Sir Brian Rouclyff and his wife, Cowthorpe church 413
10.21 Distribution of the assessed wealth of the laity, 1334 415
10.22 The dates of the building or rebuilding of parish churches in the diocese of Salisbury 417
10.23 Carrying a corpse 421
10.24 A 'hudd' 422
10.25 The 'shroud' brass of Richard and Cecilie Howard, 1499 424
10.26 The head of a churchyard cross, St Neots 426
10.27 Eighteenth-century headstones, Upwell 427
11.1 A portative organ 438
11.2 The doom above the chancel arch, St Thomas's, Salisbury 441
11.3 An altar *mensa* 443
11.4 *Sedilia* and *piscina*, Ashwell parish church 444

11.5 Easter Sepulchre, Heckington 445
11.6 A housling cloth 446
11.7 The rood-screen, Coates-by-Stow 447
11.8 Wolferton parish church 450
11.9 Altar and communion rail, Lyddington 458
12.1 Leather fire buckets, Haughley 466
12.2 A masonry bench around the base of a pillar, Hythe 469
12.3 Benches in Cawston parish church 471
12.4 Box-pews, Rycote chapel 472
12.5 A seating plan for Lostwithiel parish church 475
12.6 Hogarth's engraving 'The Sleeping Congregation' 478
12.7 Three-decker pulpit, St Margaret's, Westminster 481
12.8 Communicants kneeling round a table 483
12.9 Communicants at a communion rail 484
12.10 Trinity church, Leeds 485
12.11 An 'auditory' church, St James's, Piccadilly 487
12.12 The confirmation itinerary of Bishop Ross of Exeter 494
12.13 The distribution of Nonconformists, 1674 502
12.14 The fragmentation of the suburban parish of St Swithin's, Bath 509
12.15 The parishes of Nottingham 510

CHAPTER ONE

CHURCH AND PARISH

> Our parishes as we see them on the map today
> owe their origin and even their existing names
> to the building of a church.
>
> *J. Horace Round*[1]

> The parish is the original secular division of the
> land . . . there were by no means originally churches
> and priests to every parish. These were things
> of much later introduction.
>
> *Toulmin Smith*[2]

The parish was from the Middle Ages until late in the nineteenth century the basic territorial unit in the organisation of this country. During the Middle Ages there were in England alone some 8,500 parishes, but their number must remain uncertain for any period before the seventeenth or eighteenth century. Their geographical pattern was fluid, as large parishes broke up and smaller and poorer merged with their neighbours. In origin the parish was a unit of ecclesiastical administration and pastoral care. It was an area large enough in population and resources to support a church and its priest, and yet small enough for its parishioners to gather at its focal church. Yet this ideal was difficult to achieve and impossible to sustain.

A system of parishes had begun to evolve during the middle Anglo-Saxon period, and by the end of the twelfth century it had been extended over most of the country. Since then the only alterations have been those induced by a changing pattern of wealth and population. When they first emerged, parishes reflected the distribution of settlement and the structure of society. The size of the population and its level of wealth have since undergone profound changes. Populous parishes have divided and those too small and poor to discharge their obligations have merged with their neighbours. But the majority of parishes were little affected, and the parochial map of the early nineteenth century can, in rural areas at least, have differed little from that of six centuries earlier.[3]

Almost from the first the ecclesiastical parish had secular overtones. Many, perhaps most early parishes conformed with lay estates. They were the religious expression of the manor. But the manor itself was a fluctuating and unstable unit. It fragmented and recombined through gift, inheritance and marriage, and before the end of the Middle Ages the pattern of parishes had ceased to bear any close similarity to that of landholding. The manor had been the basic unit in the compilation of Domesday Book (1086), but a century later, in 1188, it was the parish which was used in the assessment and collection of the Saladin Tithe.[4] But this was an ecclesiastical tax; for secular purposes the state tended to use the vill. For much of England one can equate the vill with the parish, though the two were conceptually distinct. Henceforward it was the vill or parish which was made to serve increasingly secular ends. It represented in most instances a stable self-governing community, and upon it the state came to devolve essential duties in the sphere of local government. In particular, it came to be used in the assessment of the basic direct taxes of the country, the lay subsidy and the 'fifteenth' and 'tenth'. The parish through its elected officials kept roads and bridges in at least a usable condition. As the manor fragmented and its court became increasingly ineffective or even ceased to be held, the task of maintaining some kind of law and order devolved upon the parish constable. Indeed, the constable himself, from being a manorial official, became a servant of the parish (p. 193).[5] Parochial institutions provided help for the aged, the sick and the indigent in a haphazard and unsystematic way long before the Elizabethan legislation regularised the process, placed the obligation squarely on the parish, and authorised the collection of a local 'rate' for the purpose. Not until the eighteenth century did the secular role of the parish begin to decline, and not before the nineteenth were its functions gradually transferred to larger and more economic units. Even today, in rural areas, the parish council still retains vestigial functions which it has inherited from the Middle Ages.

In the later Middle Ages the judicial functions of the manor court – the *curia legalis* or court leet – largely evaporated. With the enclosure both of the open fields and of the common land and the leasing of the demesne, its regulatory functions were no longer needed. At the same time the administration of justice passed to the gentry from whom the Justices of the Peace were chosen.

The role of the parish was at its most important from the sixteenth century to the eighteenth in keeping order, relieving distress, settling disputes and maintaining an infrastructure without which society could not easily have functioned. Apart from its role in local government the parish provided the earliest lessons in democracy. Society was far from egalitarian, but it was by and large self-governing. Canon law required the parishioners to elect churchwardens who would administer the affairs of the church and, by an inevitable extension of this duty, undertake a whole range of secular functions. They came to elect the constable, the overseers of the poor and the surveyors of highways. They held in trust the small stock of communally held goods: animals, domestic utensils, charitable bequests and small parcels of land. Both custom and canon law dictated that those elected should serve their term without payment, and at the end of their perod of office should account to their public for their management of what had been entrusted to them.[6] In the small community of the parish most men could expect to hold some kind of office for a year or two, and many were called upon to serve as wardens of the church at one time and as constable or overseer of the poor at another.

While in rural areas the role of the parish was broadening at the expense of the private jurisdiction of the manor and even of the public jurisdiction of the hundred, in the towns its sphere of action was becoming narrower. Towns or boroughs, in the legal sense, had received charters of incorporation. Urban charters varied in the privileges which they granted, but at the least they provided for an elected head, a mayor and a council, and endowed them with certain functions and privileges. While the manor and its court had little to support them beyond custom, the borough could always appeal to its charter of liberties. The manor might decay and many of its functions might pass to the parish and its officers, but in the boroughs the opposite was true. The urban parish might never have enjoyed quite the autonomy of the rural, but it faced a strong rival in the institutions of the borough which had, furthermore, the support of civil law. Parochial obligations to maintain order, to repair roads and look after the sick and aged – if the urban parish ever possessed them – gradually slipped away and were exercised by the secular officers of the borough. Borough pretensions went even further. There were towns in England where the parish became wholly subservient to the mayor and council, which in extreme cases appointed the incumbent, manipulated parish bounds and even liquidated parishes and confiscated their assets (p. 130).

At the centre of the parish, whether rural or urban, its focal point and more often than not its only meeting place, was the church itself. Its maintenance was the primary purpose of the parish, whatever other duties had by a process of slow accretion become attached to it. The line between the religious functions of the parish and the secular was, indeed, a fine one, and at a time when religion permeated people's lives there seemed to be little need to define it. Whatever other influences may have impinged upon the local community, it was the church which in a physical sense continued to dominate and to give both unity and continuity to the institution of the parish. Funds entrusted to the parish for spiritual ends could readily be diverted to secular. At Walkeringham (Notts), for example, the wardens used revenue from church lands 'for the mayntaynaunce of Trent bankis [i.e. levees] and a highe waye leding to the same'.[7]

England, like much of western Europe, had by the late twelfth century become a land of parishes.[8] Yet even as late as the early nineteenth century there remained areas, small but nonetheless numerous, which had escaped the parochial net, and in doing so had remained outside the civil and ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the country. The abstract of census statistics of 1833 claimed that there were over 200 such 'extra-parochial' places. Some had been the sites of royal palaces or of castles in the jurisdiction of the sheriff and thus beyond that of parish officers. Such were the castles of Bristol, Chester and Norwich. Certain religious orders had also claimed extra-parochial privileges which were perpetuated.

The exclusion of these areas from the parochial system meant that marriages could not be solemnised there and births and deaths went unrecorded. Their non-parochial status meant, in the words of the *Abstract of Statistics*, that they enjoyed 'a virtual exemption from maintaining the Poor, because there is no Overseer on whom a Magistrate's Order may be served; from the Militia Laws, because there is no Constable to make returns; from repairing the Highways, because there is no Surveyor'. Furthermore, they were 'neither taxable nor within the ordinary pale of civil jurisdiction'.[9] In short, areas which lay outside the limits of the parochial system could be, and often were, the scenes of complete anarchy. But extra-parochial areas were of two kinds. There were those which belonged to no parish and were thus outside both ecclesiastical and civil jurisdiction, and those to which only the civil officers like the mayor were denied access.

In Chester, for example, the castle and its immediate environs, known as the Gloverstone, were extra-parochial in the former sense. They had no parish officers; the mayor had no authority there and the magistrate's writ did not run. It became an area where 'fugitives from justice . . . could find refuge and non-freemen could trade without restriction'.[10] It owed its anomalous position to its earlier subordination to the County Palatine of Chester, which had effectively ceased to exist. A similar situation existed in Bristol, where the castle had been the sphere of the sheriff of the county, and thus outside both mayoral and parochial jurisdiction. In 1628 the mayor and justices petitioned the crown that the castle might be incorporated into the city because it 'is nowe a lawlesse place and full of all disorders'.[11] It then passed under the jurisdiction of the mayor, but remained extra-parochial, so that births and deaths were still not recorded and no church rate could be levied. Nothing shows more clearly how important it was in earlier times to belong to a parish than these instances of what happened where there was none.

CHRISTIANITY IN ROMAN BRITAIN

It is not known when Christianity was first brought to Britain. It was one of the many cults of Mediterranean or Middle Eastern origin that were carried by travellers, traders and legionaries. Tertullian's claim that the country had been converted by the time when he was writing, early in the third century, is not supported by any other evidence, and must be dismissed. The first tangible evidence for Christianity within Britain appears to be the martyrdom of St Alban sometime in the third or at the beginning of the fourth century.[12] Britain was later represented at the council of the church which met at Arles by two bishops, those of London and York, and possibly by one other. Clearly there was some form of hierarchical structure even at this date, but of ecclesiastical institutions at the local level we know nothing.

Christianity was persecuted sporadically as late as the time of Diocletian (284–305), and such Christian meeting places as existed would have been secretive and encapsulated within town houses and villas.[13] The recognition of Christianity by Constantine (*c.* 313) allowed it to come out into the open, and was unquestionably followed by the building of churches in public places throughout the Empire. Charles Thomas has distinguished three types of church at this time:[14]

1. Congregational churches, as he terms them, built within cities and equipped with baptistries and residences for the local bishop.
2. Cemetery churches, established outside the walls of Roman cities and close to the burial places of the faithful and perhaps also to some relic of a saint or martyr. In the course of time 'the immemorial boundary between the city of the living and of the dead came to be breached',[15] as relics of the dead were brought within the walls. This was followed by burials in their close vicinity, since the desire to be buried in the close proximity of the remains of a saint was an enduring feature of western Christianity.
3. Lastly, there were private or estate churches. It is to this category that villas at Lullingstone (Kent) and at Hinton St Mary and Frampton in Dorset probably belong.[16] It must be assumed, furthermore, that these churches remained in use until, in the sub-Roman period, the villas themselves were abandoned.

Much of the evidence in Britain relates to the public or urban churches. 'Christianity in Roman Britain', wrote Ralegh Radford, 'was essentially urban',[17] and most others have agreed. One cannot say how many there may have been. Very few have been recognised, in part because one does not quite know what to look for. Churches had not yet assumed a definite form,[18] and, in the words of Richard Morris, 'no building which can be unequivocably identified as a Romano-British church has yet been found'.[19] Nevertheless, there are several for which a very good case can be made. Best known is a small apsidal building, with a short *porticus* or transept-like extension, and a narthex or porch, which was excavated at Silchester (Hants), the Roman town of *Calleva Atrebatum*, a century ago, and re-excavated by Sir Ian Richmond more recently (Fig. 1.1). To Frend it was 'the one indisputable basilican church'.[20] Any evidence for its date and for any Christian association has been lost.[21] Its plan, however, embraces all the essential elements of a later Christian church, and the balance of probability must favour the view that this was indeed a church built more or less along the lines of a Roman basilica.

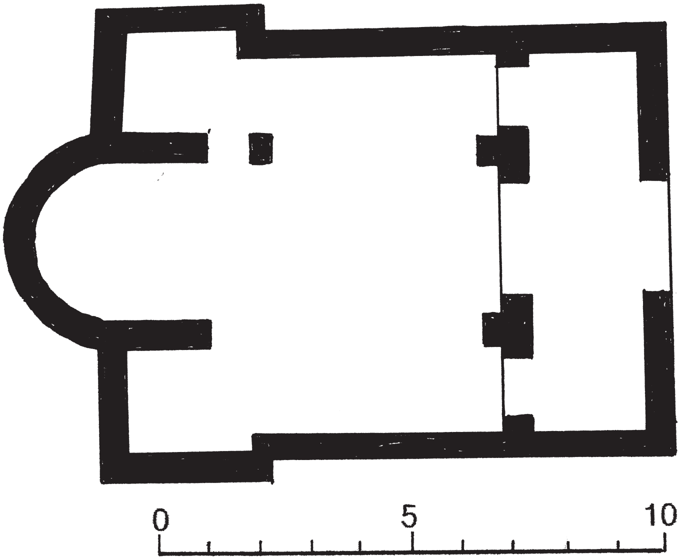

Figure 1.1 Silchester: a probable Christian church of the later Roman Empire. After G. C. Boon, *Roman Silchester*, London, 1957, 128.

If Silchester had a church, it must be considered at least probable that other cities of comparable standing also had churches. Cases can be made for Canterbury, Colchester, Lincoln, St Albans (*Verulamium*) and Caerwent (Mon) (*Venta Silurum*). Cemetery chapels just outside the walls have frequently been found in continental Europe, and have in many instances given rise to churches which still exist. The ‘crown of saints’, which encompasses Trier in western Germany, is an outstanding example.[22] But no certain instance is known in England, though Bede recorded the memory of such a church to the east of Canterbury.[23] Nothing survives of the church itself, though it is possible that the site may be marked either by St Martin’s or by St Pancras.[24] A case can also be made for St Albans, where there could have been both church and cemetery near the supposed site of the saint’s martyrdom on the hilltop to the north-east of the Roman town.

The evidence for private or house churches is more trustworthy. It consists in the main of Christian iconography, found in villas which have been excavated. Most common are the symbols α and ω and the monogram ☧.[25] Both have an almost exclusively Christian connotation. They appear in mosaics, notably at Hinton St Mary and Frampton (Dors), and as mural decoration at Lullingstone (Kent) (Fig. 1.2). The latter is a particularly instructive example, since the plaster on which it was painted was in an upstairs room and survived only because it collapsed into a basement and was buried.[26] There is further evidence for baptistries on the continental model at Icklingham (Suff) and Reculver (Kent), and also for Christian monograms cast in relief on leaden water tanks and engraved on table silver.

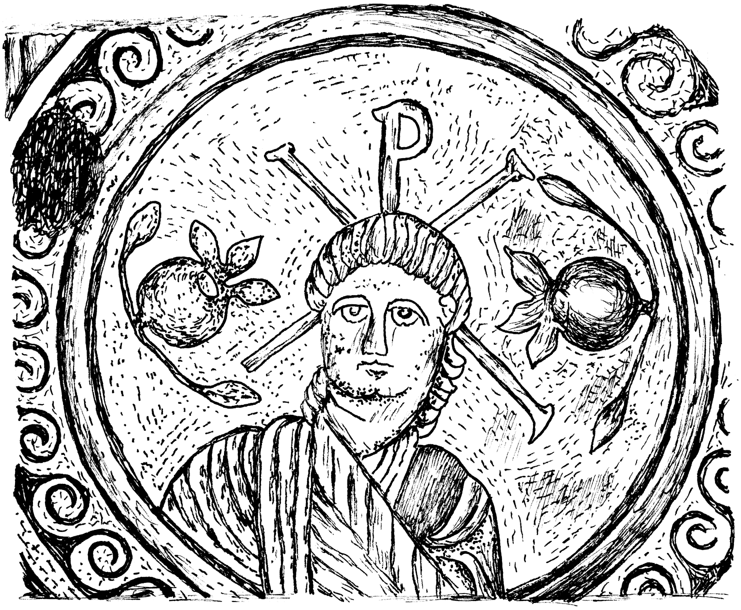

Figure 1.2 Christ with the *labarum* and two pomegranates, symbols of immortality, in the Roman villa at Hinton St Mary (Dors).

That some form of hierarchy existed in the fourth century is evident from the attendance of British bishops at the Council of Arles in 314, but it is not clear whether Britain was represented at subsequent councils before that of Rimini in 360.[27] The British church would thus appear to have been patterned on the continental model, with bishops presiding in at least some of the cities and exercising a kind of spiritual jurisdiction over their dependent *civitates* or regions. But we have absolutely no knowledge of what happened at a lower level or of how urban churches were organised. Under the Roman Empire Christianity seems largely to have been a religion of the rich landowners, and it was this class which collapsed when the social and economic world of Rome disappeared.[28] It seems never to have had the mass appeal such as it gained in Gaul from the time of Martin of Tours. Certainly there is no evidence which in any way foreshadows the future parochial system.

Limited archaeological evidence suggests that the appeal of Christianity was primarily to the urban élite and the wealthy villa-dwellers. But it is just possible that this may be deceptive. Poorer converts would not have been able to afford the mosaics and wall-paintings which are amongst the most important pieces of evidence. Nor can Christianity be said to have altogether replaced people's attachment to pagan cults. On the contrary, there is evidence for a revival of paganism in the latter part of the fourth century, associated with the short rule of the emperor Julian.[29] The temple of Sul at Bath, that of Nodens at Lydney (Glouc), and several others, all of late Roman date,[30] attracted devotees and votive offerings, and mosaics and other forms of decoration continued to represent the classical gods. Indeed, there are even instances of the ancient myths being combined with Christian symbolism in the same piece of decoration. It is difficult to understand this degree of tolerance unless one can assume, with Jocelyn Toynbee, that the classical myths had been downgraded to a kind of innocuous allegory, part of the common culture of an educated citizen of the Empire, as, indeed, it remains in the background of western art today.[31] Christianity in late Roman and sub-Roman Britain appears never to have displayed that intolerance of pagan beliefs which it showed in, for example, North Africa[32] and other parts of the Mediterranean basin. Indeed, Frend writes of a 'quiet transition' from paganism to Christianity, which gave 'new meaning to aspects of the old religion rather than supplanting it'.[33]

The Romano-Britons who had adopted the cults of Rome would in all probability have been amongst the first to accept the new cult of Christ. There would have been centres in which Christianity flourished even if it did not prevail. But elsewhere, in 'dark corners of the land', where even Romanisation had made little progress, the cults of the Romano-Britons continued to be practised in their rich variety (Fig. 1.3). By the time, in 410, when the emperor Honorius ordered the legions to return to defend Rome itself, Christianity appears to have made significant progress only in two areas: southern and south-eastern Britain, more urbanised and more thickly populated and, in a sense which the Romans would have understood it, more civilised, and the north, from York to the Wall. But over much of the land, it has generally been held, its impact had been slight, if, indeed, there had been any impact at all. 'Christianization . . . had come too late.'[34] The relative peace which had characterised the Empire and had made its diffusion possible ended soon after Christianity had reached Britain.

And yet there is evidence, ambiguous and controversial, for the survival of Christianity through the period of the invasions, until the arrival of missionaries in the seventh century. Such an area is the West Midlands, where Basset postulates the continuance of Christian communities in the vicinity of former Roman settlements, notably *Letocetum* (Wall, Staffs) and Worcester.[35]

What, then, are we to make of the so-called 'Celtic' Christianity which took root in the western and northern parts of the British Isles and directed its missionary activities towards what was about to become England? We make a grave error if we conceive of the Christianity which evolved in the Mediterranean basin as a monolithic faith. It was, in the words of Edmund Leach, 'a collectivity of overlapping millenarian sects rather than a unitary church', and the alleged 'heresies' of the 'Celtic' church had long been anticipated in the debates at the Council of Nicaea.[36] Frend has commented on the lack of compatibility between Celtic tribal organisation and the 'intellectual and episcopally organised Christianity that had been consolidating its position in southern Britain'. As Christianity spread into Celtic lands – and for this existing evidence, both literary and archaeological, is minimal – it

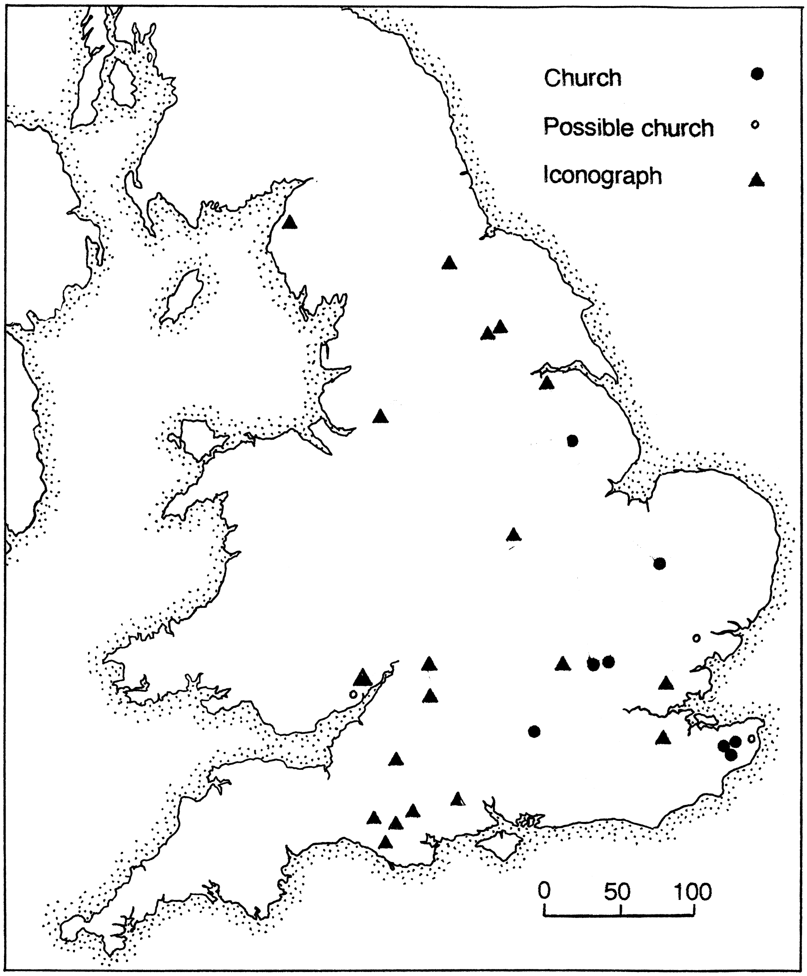

Figure 1.3 The archaeological evidence for Christianity in Roman Britain.

seems to have taken on a different complexion. Roman Christianity was intellectual, refined, urbane; Celtic was ascetic, fanatical, proselytising and fiercely dogmatic. But the beliefs and practices of the 'Celtic' church were nevertheless part of that broad spectrum which had evolved in Mediterranean Europe.

There is some slight evidence for Christianity in late Roman Wales, but whether there was any continuity from this phase to the era of the Celtic 'saints' is obscure. It is generally held that Christianity reached the western parts of Britain by way of southern Gaul, sometime in the later fourth century. Its route is far from clear. It may have spread from the south-western peninsula of Britain to Wales and thence to northern Britain, where it is just possible that there may have been Christians amongst the soldiers who manned the Roman Wall.[37] This movement must have continued through the fifth century, despite the ending of direct Roman rule. From northern Britain missionaries, particularly St Patrick, took the faith to Ireland.[38] The subsequent development of what has come to be called the Celtic Church, including the travels of the Celtic saints between Ireland, Wales, Cornwall and Brittany,[39] and the mission of St Columba to Scotland, is peripheral to this book. Nevertheless, it has been of some significance in the development of the parochial system in the south-western peninsula as far east as Somerset, in the Welsh borderland and in northern Britain. Here tradition and the somewhat fanciful lives of the 'saints' themselves ascribe many of the later parish churches to their activities.[40]

THE MISSION OF ST AUGUSTINE AND THE CONVERSION OF THE ANGLO-SAXONS

The fate of the Christian communities in Britain during the fifth and sixth centuries is uncertain. That some continued to exist, at least for a period, is apparent from the life of St Patrick, which spanned much of the fifth century, and from what we know of the mission of St Germanus of Auxerre (d. 448). The conventional view is that Christianity under the later Empire was, in the main, urban and aristocratic, and that, with the end of Roman rule, the rich became impoverished and their estates lapsed into self-sufficiency. In Gaul the cities, or at least a majority of them, continued to be inhabited if only by a greatly reduced population. Sidonius Apollinaris, bishop of Clermont, wrote about 470 from 'within the ruins' of his episcopal city.[41] It had recently been sacked by the Goths, but he nevertheless continued to live there, and his see has since had a continuous history. Such cannot be said of Britain. Here both cities and bishoprics lapsed at some date in the fifth century, and the invading Anglo-Saxons probably found little more than their ruins.

In summary, it might be said that in lowland England Christianity either lapsed or was reduced to a few semi-pagan cults because it had been dependent on cities which had in functional terms ceased to exist. In the continental West, on the other hand, it survived because its institutional base had become the city and the city-region, which in some shape or form continued in being.[42]

The Anglo-Saxon-Jutish invasions occupied the second half of the fifth century and the earlier decades of the sixth. The logistics of their movements imply the descent of relatively small bands on the unprotected shores of England, followed by their slow, probing movement into the interior. What is not in question is that they founded settlements, often in the vicinity of Roman sites, without expelling the earlier inhabitants. The first invasion of the south-east came less than two generations after the withdrawal of the legions. Christianity is unlikely to have disappeared in so short a time; indeed, there is strong evidence to the contrary. At the very least, cult sites may have continued through this period to have attracted some kind of superstitious veneration, 'to be kindled back into flame with the advent of